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SUBJECT: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: LITTLE INTEREST,
FEW SURPRISES

¶1. Nineteen percent of Slovak voters turned out this weekend to elect Euro-Parliamentarians, besting their last-in-the-EU turnout of 17 percent five years ago, but showing little interest in the process. While PM Fico's Smer party did predictably well, gaining 5 seats, each of the major opposition parties won two seats. And, for the first time, the Slovak National Party (SNS) will send a deputy to the EP.

¶2. The only minor surprises were: that a newly-formed party of liberal/libertarian technocrats, the Freedom and Solidarity Party (SAS) came very close to gaining a seat; that Smer's victory was not as impressive (31 percent) as had been forecast; and that the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) -- despite its imminent split and the usual pre-election anti-Hungarian rhetoric -- managed to hang on to two seats. Given how low voter turnout was, we don't believe the results provide much of a preview for the 2010 elections. That said, it's clear that a more united and effective opposition could give Smer a run for its money, or conversely, that a SMER-SDKU coalition may become more likely.

RESULTS

¶3. With 19 percent of the Slovak electorate voting, Smer won 32.1 percent for 5 seats; SDKU won 16.9 (the party came within 200 votes of a third seat; SMK and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) each earned two seats with 11.3 and 10.8 respectively. Notorious ex-Premier Meciar's HZDS won 8.9 percent and Jan Slota's corruption-ridden SNS won 5.5, with each scoring a seat. Finally, SAS, the new party founded by the intellect behind Slovakia's successful tax reforms, Richard Sulik, managed to get 4.7 percent of the vote. None of the other extra-parliamentary parties came close to the 5 percent threshold.

¶4. In several cases, the voters up-ended the party preference lists. Martin Fronc, who led the KDH slate, did not get enough votes for a seat. He resigned on June 8 from several leadership positions within the party, including Chairman of Foreign Relations, because of his performance in the polls. In another, albeit less dramatic upset, Boris Zala (SMER), the current chairman of the Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee was leapfrogged by current MEP Monika Flasikova-Benova. The head of SNS's list also failed to gain a seat, but was replaced by an SNS candidate further down the list.

¶5. Despite having received several complaints, the Central Election Commission stated that the elections ran smoothly, with no violations of law having been noted. Meanwhile, the media reported allegations of widespread vote-buying in the infamous Roma settlement Lunik 9, outside of Kosice. There, 80 percent of the votes went to Smer candidates.

Reactions

¶ 6. Each of the parties has characterized the weekend vote as victory. It was a small one for SMK, SNS and SAS. Given SDKU's razor-thin miss for a third seat, they performed relatively well. And, while numerically Smer was the big winner, the percentage of votes they received is significantly less than what polls suggested they would garner in regular parliamentary elections. SNS leader Slota made inadvertently humorous comments about the party's one-seat (first ever in the EP) gain: "Positive topics, such as the results of the work of our ministries...were deliberately ignored by the media." In fact, SNS-led ministries receive more press attention, particularly of late, than any other, because they are riddled with corruption.

¶ 7. Monika Flasikova-Benova, the top vote-getter for Smer, was not as enthusiastic about SNS's, nor for that matter HZDS's election results. Both SNS and HZDS have "failed in crucial issues," she said, and thus Smer must consider rationally with whom it will create a coalition in 2010. According to Flasikova, the election results open the way for creation of a coalition between Smer and SDKU. SMK Deputy Chair Jozef Berenyi told us on June 6 that his Smer colleagues were dumbfounded by SMK's self-destructive break-up. SMK had been the front-runner in the minds of many to team up with Smer in 2010. Berenyi told us, that in his mind, and SDKU-Smer coalition seemed quite possible. Comment: Given recent statements along the same lines by the Prime Minister and his top advisor, Culture Minister Madaric, we agree.

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